

Professor Gregory Jay

Do Americans Share a Common Culture?

What common beliefs, values, and cultural practices make up the culture shared by most people in the United States? The term “multiculturalism” suggests that people in the U.S. belong to many different cultures rather than all belonging to a single “American” culture? Is this true? Or is there a common culture shared by most Americans? How would we define and describe this common culture? *Warning: what follows are many very large generalizations, all of which are debatable. Indeed, the purpose of this brief discussion is to promote that debate rather than to end it.*

Below I have attempted to identify and describe some key elements of a common American culture. They include:

- Individualism
- Capitalism
- Modernism
- Religiosity
- Secularism
- Consumerism
- Monolingualism

I’ll use the term “American” here to refer to people who are citizens or residents of the United States, while recognizing that people in Central and South America often also claim the term. What I am describing is a common or “dominant” culture (otherwise termed a “hegemonic” culture). This does not mean that this culture is universal, only that it is socially and institutionally the most powerful, and that individuals feel they have no choice but to know and respond to it, even if it is only to rebel against it.

Discussions of the distinctiveness of specific cultural activities and practices, moreover, become confusing because these practices are often organized and marketed by the “culture industry,” which decides what gets produced, for whom, how often, where, at what cost, and to what end. This domination by the culture industry differs greatly from societies where cultural practices emerge organically from the everyday lives of people, from religious practices, or from other small social organizations or private associations. Thus people may argue about whether American culture is produced “by” the people themselves (and so is expressive of their values and beliefs) or just sold to them (and so is expressive of the values and beliefs that the culture industry’s owners want them to embrace).

Finally, I should acknowledge that some would call this “common culture” an “ideology.” As such, it would be a set of beliefs that actually mis-perceive rather than accurately describe the social reality, and does so to the hidden benefit of specific groups and classes. I’ll leave that debate for another time.

Elements of a Common American Culture

1. **Individualism.** Americans believe in the priority of individualism. People are to be judged by their individual actions and achievements rather than by their belonging to a particular group (racial, ethnic, class, caste, etc.). Americans suspect that institutions and social organizations tend to inhibit or oppress the freedom of individuals, and so Americans celebrate individualistic rebels (cowboys, motorcycle outlaws, detectives, punk rockers and hip-hoppers, etc.). American culture thus features stories and images dramatizing the individual's struggle with society (in literary classics, for example, such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Color Purple*, or movies such as *Schindler's List*). American culture, then, differs sharply from that of societies where the individual is less important than the tribe, clan, family, race, or ethnic group, and where individuals are valued for how well they conform to the group rather than the way that they are unique.
2. **Capitalism.** Americans believe in and practice the economic system of "capitalism," in which property and wealth are accumulated and owned by individuals; this differs from other economic systems in which the family, tribe, community, or state own the means and modes of production. Individuals who accumulate great amounts of capital are thus both very powerful and much respected in a capitalist society, which looks down on poorer people because they have failed to succeed. Economic success or failure is judged to be the responsibility of individuals, and thus a matter of merit or achievement. Hence the cultural tendency to represent the poor as less moral, less ambitious, less intelligent, etc., since their condition is reflective of their character. This differs from cultures in which a person's fortune is seen as arbitrarily dispensed by luck, fate, or prejudice. Though the United States is a democracy, inequalities of wealth create inequalities of power, so that wealthy individuals dominate most sectors of the society, the economy, the government, and the media. Most Americans accept this inequality of power because they believe that wealth signifies a superiority of skills, talent, or knowledge.
3. **Modernism.** Americans believe in progress, or the idea that history moves in a linear way forward towards greater and greater things. Thus Americans prefer the new to the old, innovation to tradition, the future to the past. Americans do not know much about history and do not believe it is very important (beyond sentimental ceremonies). Americans reject the idea that the past determines the present or the future. Americans believe that every day is a new day, and that anything is possible (hence the idea of the "American innocent"). Thus the American viewpoint differs from cultures where the power of the past or of fate is dominant (Ancient Greek culture, Hindu society) or where time is seen as repetitive or circular (some Native American cultures).
4. **Religiosity.** Most Americans believe in a God or Supreme Being who created the universe, actively watches over it, and who will judge them and their actions. Americans distrust people who do not believe in God or question God's existence; such people are often ostracized socially or in business or education, and such views are not prominent in the mainstream media. Thus Americans are a more religious people than Western Europeans, and more similar in this regard to followers of Islam or the Jews of Israel. Americans attend religious services frequently and often socialize or conduct business along religious lines, or use religious perspectives in conducting arguments about

public policy or private morality. Christianity is the dominant religious force in the United States, though with wide differences in practice among the various Protestant sects, Catholics, and Mormons.

5. **Secularism.** Despite the preponderance of religiosity in American culture, the United States is predicated on a strict separation of church and state. This means that citizenship, legal rights, participation in government, and access to public services are to be universally available regardless of religious affiliation. Legally, “tolerance” of religious differences is the law of the United States, and the government may not undertake any action on behalf of or in unique support of particular religious denominations. Yet in practice there is much tension between the legal secularism of the United States and the cultural religiosity of its people (the Congress, for example, inserted the phrase “under God” in the otherwise secular Pledge of Allegiance). Many of the most influential “Founding Fathers” of the United States in 1776 belonged to the culture of the European Enlightenment. They rejected the more fundamentalist theologies of Catholicism and Protestantism in favor of “Deism,” a vaguer doctrine that affirmed the common spiritual core of all religions.
6. **Consumerism.** Americans participate actively in a culture of consumerism, in which what you buy and own signifies your identity, character, beliefs, and values. They relish goods that carry brand names on them or whose style signifies knowledge of the latest trends. American culture runs on advertising, the major cultural media experience of most Americans. In advertising, images and stories relate consumer objects to core beliefs and values and offer consumers a way of seeing themselves through the act of making specific purchases. Watching commercials and going on shopping trips are cultural rituals universally practiced by Americans, who spend much more time (and money) on these rituals than on any other. A belief in “fashion” is a key element in consumerism. Americans wear clothing and other objects that indicate their place in the present and future, rather than the past. They do not wear traditional outfits or clothing that has come down unchanged through the centuries. A hallmark of the Americanization of global culture is the adoption of Western clothing fashions and the discarding of traditional outfits.
7. **Monolingualism.** The dominant language of the United States is Americanized English. This is the language used in government, schools, businesses, and most other organizations. An inability to speak English damages an individual’s ability to succeed in the United States, and may be the target of harassment and mockery by others. Many Americans, however, speak and write languages other than English (Spanish is the most prevalent of these, and its use is growing). In some communities, ethnic separation makes it possible for a language other than English to be the dominant and accepted common language for social exchanges and some business and even legal proceedings. The dominance of English means that the study of English and the study of literature written in English forms a core part of the school and college curricula, which means that the culture and history of England and Western Europe predominate in those curricula.

Afterword: Multiculturalism or a Common Culture?

Terms like "multiculturalism" beg the question of what "culture" or "cultural" mean in the first place. What is a culture, anyway? The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines culture in the following way:

The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population.

According to the dictionary, certain forms of behavior, patterns of belief, and kinds of artistic expression that are all the "products of human work" constitute the "culture" of a "community" or "population," and we can supposedly differentiate between communities and populations by noting the differences in their cultures. But how homogenous are cultures in the first place and how much are they characterized by sameness? Is a culture a population where everyone believes the same things, acts the same way, produces the same art, and where everyone comes from the same racial or ethnic stock? If not, how can we reconcile our sense of "culture" with the dictionary definition just cited? How much diversity can there be in behavior, beliefs, forms of artistic expression, etc., within a single culture?

These questions are particularly vexing when applied to "American" culture, since our population has traditionally (and increasingly) been made up of people coming to the U.S. from all over the world, with a host of ethnic and racial backgrounds, beliefs, behaviors, and forms of artistic expression. The original band of settlers who came to America may have been primarily British, and a little later, generally of Western European stock, but what about the indigenous peoples who already lived here? Where does their culture fit in "American" culture? What about the cultures of the people of Africa who were brought here as slaves? What about the culture of Hispanic Americans (a population of people produced by the intermarriage of Indians and Spanish -- "mestizo") who have in increasing numbers returned from Mexico and Latin America to what they believe is "Aztlán," their former home in the North? What about Chinese culture, brought to America in the mid-19th century by the cheap laborers who built the transcontinental railroad? What about the culture of Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist peoples who have immigrated to America? What about the increasing number of creole people from the West Indies living in the U.S., people who have brought here a highly syncretic set of cultural practices? The list could go on.

Given all of this diversity, how does "culture" in the U.S. relate to the definition quoted above? Doesn't the U.S. dramatize the extent to which all national cultures are in fact "multicultural," suggesting that the emphasis ought to be less on how to keep the culture pure and traditional than on how to nurture its continual growth and transformation? Or can we argue that each ethnic group adapts itself to the American common culture, not abandoning its own features but certainly conforming in general ways to the dominant belief system. This latter argument rests on the thesis that "culture" is an expression of the way of life of a people; if peoples of different ethnic background adopt the American capitalist, consumerist way of life, their culture will surely change as well. What was once specific to the African or Indian or Mexican culture will soon be in the American marketplace, ready to be exchanged and borrowed and used by others until it transforms American culture itself.